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The Horrors and Rewards of the Soviet Occupation of Afghanistan

The Red Army finally gets a chance to test its stuff

By Philip Jacobson

MANY WESTERNERS HAVE devised a pleasing vision of the Soviet Union getting bogged down in Afghanistan as America did in Vietnam. Perhaps. But the vision should not be entirely comforting — especially if one considers the strengthened Soviet military that is being forged in the Afghan conflict.

Those fond of Vietnam analogies would do well to recognize that Afghanistan has given the Soviet high command the "combat laboratory" it has coveted for so long, the ground where a vast military machine that hasn't fought seriously for almost 40 years is being subjected to the stresses of real warfare.

During Vietnam, Soviet generals were openly envious of the Pentagon's opportunity to test men, weapons and tactics in what one of them called *Avtomatiziro pole boya Gen. Uestmorelanda* — "Gen. Westmoreland's automated battlefield." Today, a Soviet colonel extolling the performance of his young helicopter pilots for readers back home describes Afghanistan as "a real training ground" where one month of flying duty can be enough to secure top proficiency ratings.

Listen to some of the other voices of Soviet company commanders, pilots and non-commissioned officers from the Afghan front: In the newspaper of the Soviet armed forces, Red Star, a young army officer describes his technique for moving armored vehicles across fast-flowing rivers in hostile territory. In the military journal War Notes, a veteran warrant officer stresses the value of training infantrymen specifically to cope with the appalling Afghan terrain.

In other service journals Maj. E. Belynyev writes about "A Helicopter Strike" and Lt. V. Gorbenko about "Attacks in a Mountain Pass."

These and other lessons are being passed back in a stream of articles for the military press. Much of this material is "open" and therefore available to Western analysts, but the message it carries -- crucial to understanding what is happening in Afghanistan today — still tends to escape the attention of the nonspecialist media.

That lesson is that despite heavy losses — perhaps 12,000 Soviet troops dead and wounded, an estimated $1.5 billion in direct aid merely to prop up the ramshackle Afghan army — Russian generals do not appear eager to get out of Afghanistan. They are learning too much.

The Soviet helicopter arm, for example, provides one of the most striking examples of the Soviet military benefits in Afghanistan.

Before the invasion, there appeared to be no real understanding among senior commanders about how helicopters fitted into overall battle plans, or even what they could and could not do. The MI24 gunship — codenamed "Hind" by NATO — was quite untried outside routine Eastern bloc maneuvers. Yet within weeks of appearing in the skies over Afghanistan, these ungainly machines, massively armed with Gatling-type cannon, rockets and 500-pound bombs, had become as symbolic of the Soviet presence as Hueys and Chinooks once were of America in Vietnam.

There were early problems as pilots trained for the European plains learned about the hazards of flying through towering mountains and winding valleys — violent downdrafts, sudden white-outs, precarious landing zones. Soon the first articles calling for a revised approach to helicopter operations began turning up in the military journals.

Lt. Col. Artemko gave Red Star his account of "An Assault Landing Force Capturing Its Objective." More significantly, there was a stream of practical advice from the cockpit: the best way to evacuate casualties at speed under enemy guns; how to ferry heavy weapons and equipment over otherwise impassable terrain; how to use ground contours for cover.

The ground crews adapted quickly, reveling in near-immunity against an enemy whose chief form of anti-aircraft defense consisted of rifles (often obsolete, bolt-action Lee Enfields). The gunships have become the invaluable workhorses of the occupation army, flying around the clock on everything from convoy protection and artillery spotting to resupply and search-and-destroy missions that have been the scourge of the *mujaheddin* guerrillas.

The influence of Vietnam on Soviet experiments with helicopter tactics also became increasingly apparent in the use of airmobile troops.

In the early phase of the invasion, a Russian mountain warfare expert, Col. Yuri Pavlov, used Red Star for some pungent criticism of the inflexibility of operations against elusive guerrillas fighting on their own ground. Just a few months later, Col. Pavlov was reporting, with evident approval, on "From Helicopters into the Assault." Paratroopers and frontline infantry units were beginning to be helicoptered straight into battle against enemy positions in the mountains, their task to hold the heights while armored columns and trucks worked their way forward on the ground.

It is also possible to draw a comparison between the stunning impact of the mobility and awesome firepower of the Hinds on disorganized, poorly armed *mujaheddin* and the early success of U.S. helicopters against guerrillas in Vietnam. One *mujaheddin* leader still trembles as he recalls watching six Hinds flying line abreast just above the ground, devastating everything before them.

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In a convoy on the Kabul-Ghazni road a couple of years ago, I watched several gunships pounding possible ambush positions in the scrub for almost an hour. It reminded me of "reconnaissance by fire," Vietnam-style, I remarked to a Russian officer waiting with us. "Perhaps so," he said, "but here the helicopters are going to win."

To dent that confidence, the *mujaheddin* need to acquire quantities of modern anti-aircraft weapons, above all portable ground-to-air missiles, and to find the courage and discipline to stand their ground against gunship strikes that the Vietcong and North Vietnamese troops developed.

Even that might not do the trick. Excited by discovering just what their helicopters are capable of, the Russians are constantly adapting and improving Hinds to carry greater loads and even more intimidating firepower (one Western expert believes they are intent on producing "a flying tank.") With Afghanistan also responsible for great advances in battlefield maintenance under dreadful conditions, the war has clearly proved its laboratory value in a previously neglected corner of the Soviet military lineup.

The Russians' emphasis on helicopters overshadows the use of tactical air power in Afghanistan, but there have been reports that the latest Soviet ground attack plane, the SU-25, flew in from bases in the U.S.S.R. to take part in a major offensive last summer.

Most fighter-bomber crews are trained for close support roles with ground troops in the European theater, but they have proved their use in Afghanistan on sorties against targets deep inside *mujaheddin* territory. Houses, crops and livestock are systematically bombed and rocketed in what is obviously a scorched-earth campaign to deny the guerrillas food and shelter. Civilian casualties are often severe, and the raids add to the throngs of desperate refugees treking through the mountains toward Pakistan.

The use of Soviet armor in Afghanistan provides another good example of frontline experience triumphing over the training manuals.

Western journalists who arrived just after the invasion were mystified by the love affair between the Russians and their tanks once the main cities had been secured. Out in the wild countryside, watching crews curse stripped tracks, dust-choked engines and boulder-strewn dirt roads, tanks seemed next to useless. In Vietnam, after all, Americans soon discovered their limitations, confining their use to street fighting, convoy protection and artillery support on infantry operations.

But orthodox doctrine held that large tank concentrations were at the heart of Soviet battle strategy, so the slow-moving, unreliable, noisy columns continued to grind out ahead of infantry sweeps. Bitter experience soon established that tanks without a protective shield of motorized infantry became sitting ducks for the guerrillas' rocket-propelled grenades as they inched up twisting mountain passes.

Again, criticism from the men on the ground began to reach the service press back home. Under titles like "The March — An Examination for Tankers," officers and NCOs complained about poor maintenance standards, inefficient tank gunners, even poor basic driving skills.

The message sunk in at headquarters. It became much less common to see large Soviet tank formations heading into the countryside. When they were used on sweeps, they began to be accompanied by infantry squads covering them against ambush. The job of carrying foot soldiers into battle and providing covering fire was largely taken over by the new Soviet armored fighting vehicles that so impressed Western observers when they turned up in Afghanistan. But these, too, have mechanical problems on mountain trails, and the guerrillas claim their exhaust fumes can be spotted miles away.

The Russians have also discovered, predictably, that on-the-job training works for both sides. Col. D. Gavrilov sent War Notes a report of reconnaissance teams probing nervously for guerrilla ambushes, leap-frogging from one cleared position to another on a winding defile ahead of the main patrol. Another report in Red Star, ostensibly describing a "training exercise" in Afghanistan, read very much like the story of a real and bloody series of blunders. "Were such a thing to happen in actual combat," said the officer who wrote it, "the commanders' imprudence would have cost the battalion dearly."

The most far-reaching effect of the Afghan experience on the Soviet army could already be working its way through to the Russian divisions facing NATO in Europe.

Long before the invasion, Kremlin strategists suspected that a particularly serious weakness had become embedded in the command structure: At "subunit" level — the platoons and companies that do the hard slogging on the ground in conventional warfare — there was a desperate shortage of outstanding leaders among the NCOs and junior officers. Everyone understood why: "The book," a rigid chain of command that actively discouraged initiative and daring where it was most valuable.

On the ground, precious military intelligence, the lifeblood of counterinsurgency operations, was being squandered because a prudent young lieutenant in the boondocks would automatically refer anything out of the ordinary — a chance to ambush the ambushers or to catch *mujaheddin* concentrations in the open — up the line for formal approval from his superiors. This could take hours, sometimes days, to come through.

The frontline troops in Afghanistan understood what was happening. In angry letters home (often taken, unposted, from their corpses by the guerrillas), they complained about clinging to the textbook tactics that kept them clustered like target markers around their armored vehicles when the shooting began. "We nearly always run into sniper fire," one sergeant wrote to a friend. "Very accurate stuff, clean shots throught the head and the heart."

Once more, pressure for change was translated into critical reports in the military journals from soldiers who were convinced they knew more than the training programs. It was essential to get up into the hills and attack the guerrillas on their own terms, wrote the author of "Snipers in the Sights." Form special squads of marksmen to skirmish ahead of the lines; use flame-throwers to force the enemy out of caves and mountain redoubts.

In October 1980, barely nine months into the invasion, Col. Gen. O. Kulishev, commander of Transcaucasiah military district (where Soviet mountain fighting is taught) burst into print under his own name. The key to success, Kulishev declared, was small, fast-moving units led by warrant officers and sergeants trained "for independence in making decisions."

With a general behind them, other officers weighed in. Mountain combat demanded "decentralization of troop command and control," Col. Ryzhkow insisted in War Notes magazine: Anyone examiming the training and tactics of U.S. mountain units could only conclude that initiative in the field had to be matched by flexibility in the command center. Gen. Kulishev must have been delighted to find bright sergeants and warrant officers writing forcefully about the need for improved physical fitness among conscripts and for training in the arts of scaling cliffs, fording rivers and skiing into battle.

Here was the "combat laboratory" at work, and at least one guerrilla leader could testify to the results. His camp, high in inaccessible hill country, was suddenly attacked by black-uniformed commandos charging out of the night to inflict severe casualties. A young doctor in Lenigad, back from active service, told friends how Soviet special forces would penetrate deep into guerrilla territory to surround suspect villages, then "go in with cold steel." All this assumed an unprecedented degree of responsibility for the leaders on the spot.

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The Soviet military hierarchy is probably still more cautious than most in the West when it comes to experimenting with radical changes in tactical philosophy. In recent years, however, Soviet armed forces have been moving steadily toward a high degree of specialization, training and equipping for a number of very different kinds of war in very different parts of the world.

More than 400,000 Russian troops have been rotated in and out of Afghanistan, among them many thousands of junior commanders whose hard-won combat experience is now being shared with those bound for the fighting there.

The significance to the Kremlin of what is being learned, tested and refined in the freezing mountains and dangerous valleys so far may outweigh the considerable cost in lives and hardware. With no free press to reproach them, no anti-war demonstrations in Red Square, it seems unlikely that the Soviet leaders are ready to cut their generals off from enjoying the benefits of the Afghan battlefield.

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